

Again by DBSean

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Summary: "Again. Again. Again." When Eleven experiences a traumatic flashback during her last class of the day, Mike takes it upon himself to save the day using high school psychology. Thank God for Pavlov, right?

Again

"Again"

A/N: Second "Stranger Things" story in two days. I must be good at this, or something.

Takes place post-Season 2, so spoilers abound.

"Again."

Eleven pushed harder, sweat gleaming on her brow as she tried for what felt like the hundredth time that day. Her head pounded with effort, but she pushed on, focusing all of her attention, all of her energy, on the task at hand.

The dummy didn't move. Not even an inch.

"Again."

Brenner frowned as he watched the proceedings from behind the protective layer of bulletproof glass erected alongside the far wall, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with some of the best minds the "Department of Energy" had to offer. Small lights flashed and readouts were being printed, but Brenner's attention was focused entirely on Eleven.

The girl sat on the other side of the glass, staring at the crash test dummy Brenner and the other scientists had propped up at the other end of the room. The machines indicated she was indeed trying; the readings were stronger than they had ever been before.

Still, the dummy did not move.

"Again," Brenner repeated into the microphone, his usually calm voice betraying his own frustration. Eleven sensed his impatience and winced as though bitten.

"I'm trying," she said weakly, momentarily breaking her concentration to look to her Papa for guidance, guidance which she knew was never going to come.

"I need you to try harder," Brenner told her, once again projecting his voice into the room. "Again."

Eleven tried again, harder this time, so hard she felt like her brain was going to pop out of her skull. Even the cold chair beneath her seemed to rattle and shake.

But the dummy didn't move.

"Again," Brenner repeated, his voice growing ever sterner.

"I can't do it, Papa," Eleven admitted, her lip quivering as tears began to form at the edges of her eyes. "It's too hard."

"You can and you will," Brenner told her. "I don't want to have to punish you, Eleven."

"But I can't! I can't!" Eleven began to sob.

Brenner sighed, his finger hovering the red button next to his microphone. "I'm sorry, Eleven. You leave me no choice."

He pushed the button.

Eleven felt her teeth rattle in her gums and her eyes roll up into her head as painful bolts of electricity surged out of the headgear she was always forced to wear during her training sessions. She tried to scream, she wanted to scream, she wanted to scream so badly it would make everything stop, but there was nothing she could do with the current holding her in place. The only thing she could do was wait for it to stop. Ride it out.

Endure.

After three seconds that felt like three days, the torture came to an end and Eleven found herself gasping for air. The electricity was gone, but the pain remained, a deep aching soreness that seemed to settle all throughout her body, draining her of life and vitality. Tears glimmered at the edges of the girl's eyes as she struggled merely to maintain consciousness.

"You made me do that, Eleven," Brenner told her over the intercom,

his voice cold and his expression unchanged. "Do you understand me?"

Eleven nodded, biting her lip to fight back the tears. "Yes, Papa."

"Are you ready to cooperate?"

Eleven nodded again, her voice even softer. "Yes, Papa."

"Good. *Again.*"

"Would you like to try again, Jane?" asked Mrs. Crawford, pulling Eleven out of her memories and back to the real world.

It was October, 1985, and Jane "Eleven" Hopper was not sitting in a sterilized white room, but in her eighth period Algebra class at Hawkins High School, which she had only been attending for about a month. Likewise, replacing Dr. Brenner and the dozen other scientists of Hawkins Lab were Eleven's elderly math teacher Mrs. Crawford, and twenty-two other students, all of whom were staring at her with varying degrees of impatience, waiting for an answer.

Eleven blinked. "Um. Yes, please. I'll try again."

"Well, go on," Mrs. Crawford responded.

There was another pause before Eleven spoke again. "I...don't remember the question."

The girl felt her cheeks turn red as Mrs. Crawford rolled her eyes and several of the surrounding students laughed at her. She didn't understand what was so funny, but she knew they were laughing at her, and she didn't like it.

"Question eight," Mrs. Crawford told her, her patience clearly at an end. "You were to solve for x . So tell me, Jane, what is x ?"

Eleven hadn't solved for x . Eleven hadn't even finished question six yet, much less question eight. She began to panic, and the young man sitting next to her noticed.

"It's okay," Mike whispered to Eleven, a gentle smile rested easily on

his face. Eleven lived for those smiles. "Just take a guess."

"Um," Eleven began. She chose the first number she could think of. "Eleven?"

"It's not eleven," Mrs. Crawford informed her. "Again."

Eleven swallowed hard. "Ten?"

"No," Mrs. Crawford repeated. "Again."

Eleven felt the sweat on her brow, felt her brain pounding in her head. The chair beneath her felt hard and cold, just as it had all those years ago.

"Eight?"

"Again."

"El?" Mike asked, growing concerned as he watched her struggle to answer.

(again)

Tears stung at the edges of Eleven's eyes as she felt her breath catch in her throat. Mrs. Crawford's voice was slowly beginning to change, to distort itself into something darker, something colder, something more familiar and thus more frightening.

"T-Ten?"

"You said ten already, Jane. Again."

(again)

The air around her grew hotter and more stifling. She could feel her fingers shaking, preparing for the current to come running through them at any moment...

Mike frowned. There was definitely something wrong.

"Twelve?"

"Again!"

(again again again)

"I...I..." Eleven stuttered, her voice catching in her throat as she suddenly found it increasingly difficult to breathe. She knew what was coming, she was ready for it but scared nonetheless, tightening her hands into fists in preparation, fighting back the tears she felt stinging her eyes as the heat and the energy and the power came surging back ever closer, closer, closer, about to strike at any moment, any moment now it would –

BRIIIIING!

Eleven gasped loudly as the school bell rang and the last class of the day was dismissed, her sudden outburst of air thankfully smothered by the sounds of the students around her all getting up and gathering their things.

"Don't forget to study for your exam on Thursday," Mrs. Crawford reminded everyone as the freshmen picked up their books and backpacks and began heading out of the classroom, most without bothering to so much as look at the woman as they left.

(again again again again again)

Eleven stood up shakily, running a sweaty hand through her curly hair as she struggled to catch her breath and stop her heart from pounding in her chest. Now that the torment had ended, all she wanted to do was get out of the classroom and leave and never come back, but as she began to gather her things it suddenly seemed as though she had too many books and notebooks and pens and pencils, and she knew there was no way she was going to be able to pack it all up or organize it properly, she was going to end up dropping everything and taking too long, and then Mrs. Crawford would ask what was wrong and she would have to talk to her again and explain why she didn't know the answer, and –

(againagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagainagain)

"You okay, El?" Mike asked, a frown of clear concern quickly

consuming his features. All of the other students had left, leaving only Mike and Eleven behind, with Mrs. Crawford standing in the hallway and helping to direct traffic.

"I...I can't," Eleven tried to explain. She wiped the tears from her eyes and tried to speak. "My things."

"Your...oh!" Mike exclaimed upon realization. "Yeah, sure, no problem."

As Eleven watched in awe, Mike quickly and easily picked up all of her belongings and placed them into her backpack right where they were supposed to be. Pens and pencils went into the pencil pouch, books and notebooks were organized and closed and placed according to subject. How did he make it look so easy?

"AV room?" Mike asked as he handed Eleven her backpack.

Eleven nodded quickly, still fighting back tears. Mike merely offered her another reassuring smile and reached down to take her hand in his. Eleven's heart fluttered as she felt Mike's fingers intertwine with her own, joining them together, telling her he would always be there for her. It was small, but it meant the world to her.

"Come on."

Mike diligently led the way out of the classroom, through the hallways and past the lockers and all of the other students. Not for the first time, Eleven was in awe of how seamlessly Mike seemed to navigate the halls of the school, especially considering he was as new to the building as she was, the two of them having entered freshmen year together with the rest of the party. Maybe it was the Dungeon Master in him.

The two finally found the AV room and, upon inspecting it and finding it to be empty, closed the door behind them as they entered. Larger and with far more equipment than the AV room of Hawkins Middle, the Hawkins High School AV room had become something of an unofficial home base for Mike, El, and the rest of the party. Truth be told, the school administration hadn't needed a lot of coaxing to hand the room over to the six of them; it wasn't like the school had

the funding for a proper AV Club anyway, not with football season in full swing.

"So, now that we're alone, what's the – "

Mike didn't even have a chance to finish his question before Eleven threw herself at him, wrapping her arms around him and immediately burying her face into his fuzzy sweater as the tears returned with a vengeance. Eleven squeezed her eyes closed and fought with all of her might, but there was no stopping the tears this time, and she soon found herself crying into Mike's sweater.

"H-Hey, it's...it's okay," Mike said soothingly, hesitantly wrapping his own arms around the girl holding onto him for what seemed like dear life as he felt her body wracked by sobs. Despite how close they had grown, and how often they found themselves touching, even (and especially) without realizing it, Mike still found it difficult to focus whenever Eleven was nearby, as though the light and heat of the Sun itself was just within his reach, her presence alone enough to make him completely forget about everything and everyone else around him. As his mother put it upon meeting "Jane" for the first time, Mike seemingly 'only had eyes for her.'

The waterworks were in full effect now, and Eleven was inwardly cursing herself for allowing it to come this far. She knew she could be herself in front of Mike, could tell him anything, but she hated feeling so weak and powerless when he wasn't around. He wasn't just her friend, he was her security blanket, and he deserved so much better. This thought only issued forth another wave of tears, however, and Eleven responded by burying her red face farther still into Mike's chest, praying the tears would come to an end.

"I'm here, I'm here," Mike reminded Eleven as he pulled her in closer, already feeling the moisture of her tears beginning to permeate his sweater. He moved one of his hands up to awkwardly place it on the back of Eleven's head, his fingers running through her curly hair, holding her to him as his mother had done for him a thousand times before as a child. "It's okay. It's gonna be okay. Whatever it is, we'll deal with it, okay?"

As was so often the case, Mike was right, and within a matter of

minutes, Eleven finally felt the tears begin to slow and the pressure in her head and heart begin to subside. She sniffled as she pressed her head into Mike's now-damp sweater, the last of her energy all but gone.

"Thank you," she whispered into Mike's sweater.

"Yeah, sure," Mike responded, looking down at the girl in his arms with what he hoped was an expression of utmost sympathy. "Anytime. I mean...it's kinda what I'm for."

Eleven sniffled again, tightening her hold on her Mike. "You're for a lot of things."

Mike smiled. "Better?"

"Better."

"Do you...want to talk about it?" Mike ventured.

"Don't want to," Eleven said with a sigh. "But...yes."

Finally releasing her death grip on Mike, Eleven pulled away and hoisted herself up onto the main desk of the AV room, sitting back so she could leave her legs swinging a foot or so above the ground. She continued to sniffle lightly as Mike dutifully sat down right next to her; he awkwardly placed an arm around Eleven's shoulders, then let out the breath he was holding when he felt Eleven rest her head on his shoulder and snuggle up to him.

"So, um...was it Mrs. Crawford?" Mike asked. "Did she do something?"

"Yes," Eleven began, "but not her fault."

"What was it?"

Eleven took a deep breath. "It was...'again.'"

Mike frowned, clearly not understanding. "What?"

Eleven lifted her head off his shoulder so she could look him in the

eye, and when next she spoke, it was with a much sterner, more serious tone. There was a darkness in her eyes, one Mike had seen altogether too many times, but thankfully less frequently of late.

"Again," she said, voice as cold as ice.

"Again," Mike repeated, still frowning and doing his best to understand.

"Papa used to say it," Eleven explained. "When I wasn't trying hard enough. When he wanted more. He said 'again.'"

Eleven punctuated her statement by poking Mike in the ribs, just enough for it to hurt. Mike protested lightly, only for Eleven to do it again.

"Again," she said, with another jab to the ribs.

"Again." Jab.

"Again." Jab.

"Again." Jab.

She was about to do it again when Mike suddenly reached out and grabbed her wrist, stopping her short. Fresh tears gleamed at the edges of her eyes as Mike looked into them, watching as the darkness began to fade away and be replaced by the usual softness of the girl he loved. He slid his hand down into hers, intertwining their fingers and absentmindedly running his thumb over the number tattooed on her wrist.

That's when it finally hit him.

"He hurt you," Mike said, his eyes widening with both realization and horror. "When you couldn't do it, or...or you didn't want to. He hurt you."

Eleven nodded, sniffing again in the process. "'Again' meant I was bad. 'Again' meant I was...punished."

"Jesus, El – "

"I still feel it, Mike," Eleven interrupted, her voice wavering once again. Her brown eyes were large and quivering, still wet with the potential onset of another crying session. "Papa isn't here, but...I still feel it. Still here. And it hurts. It hurts so much, Mike."

Now it was Mike's turn to pull Eleven into a tremendous bear hug, and so sudden was it that the girl actually gasped upon feeling him wrap his arms around her and pull her close. It felt just like the night she had returned to Hawkins from Chicago almost a year ago, when she stepped into the Byers' household and found him waiting for her there, tears in his eyes, and they had taken hold of each other and simply basked in one another's presence for a few, sweet seconds, the first time they had seen each other in over a year, and they silently promised themselves, right then and there, that they would never be separated again.

"I'm sorry, El," Mike mumbled into her shoulder as she felt him snuggle into his embrace. "I'm so sorry."

"Not your fault," Eleven reminded him, but that didn't matter to Mike. She knew right away that he was already at work on a potential solution to the problem at hand; maybe it was the scientist in him, or maybe it was just because he cared, but she could practically hear the gears turning in his head as he put his mind to work.

Thankfully, Mike had won every science fair he had ever entered (bar one), so it didn't take him very long to come up with a solution.

Eleven's brow furrowed as Mike pulled back from their embrace and gave her a small smile, the one he always wore when he had a surprise for her, when he knew something she didn't know and he just couldn't wait to tell her about it.

"I have an idea," he told her. "Pavlov's dogs!"

"Pav-lov?" Eleven inquired, trying out the new word.

"Yeah, Pavlov, he was a psychologist like a hundred years ago," Mike explained excitedly, and Eleven had to struggle to fight back a smile. She loved listening to him when he spoke to her about science, as though it was the most fascinating thing in the world; from the way

he described it, it may well have been.

"Pavlov did a bunch of tests with dogs – Mr. Clarke told us all about it last year – where he would study how they responded to a bunch of different stuff," Mike continued. "He would ring a bell every time he fed the dogs, and eventually the dogs learned that the sound of the bell meant food. Eventually, the dogs started drooling anytime they heard a bell ring because they thought it meant food, even when Pavlov rang the bell without feeding them. I think it's called conditioning, or something like that."

Eleven blinked. She understood the story, but she wasn't sure she understood what it had to do with the situation at hand.

"What I'm trying to say is that you're just like one of those dogs," Mike explained, talking so quickly he didn't even have time to regret his choice of words. "Even though Bre—the bad men aren't here to punish you, you still feel like they are when you hear the word 'again.' Right?"

Eleven nodded.

"So, what we have to do," Mike went on, "is recondition you. We have to give you something else to think about whenever you hear that word, so you don't associate it with...with what used to happen."

"Like what?" Eleven inquired.

"Whatever you want," Mike told her. "Just...do something, or say something, and I'll ask you to do it again, until it works. Okay?"

Eleven nodded. "Okay."

Mike smiled. "Alright, so, um...go ahead. Do whatever you want."

And so, Eleven thought about it. What did she want to do that she would want to do again and again? What thought or speech or action would be strong enough – positive enough – to potentially override the fear and pain Brenner had instilled in her? It had to be something enjoyable, something meaningful, something she could do again and again and never get tired of, something that meant the world to her –

Eleven's eyes widened as it suddenly came to her, and her cheeks blushed a deep red. She jumped off the desk and onto her own two feet, and turned so she was standing in front of Mike and looking him right in the eye.

"Anything I want?" she asked, swallowing hard.

"Anything you want," Mike reassured her with a small smile, still leaning on the desk.

"And...you'll make me do it again?"

"Well, yeah."

"Promise?" El asked one last time, looking up at him with her big brown eyes, shaded as they were by her curly hair and her cheeks still flush with red.

Mike nodded, blushing lightly himself now, but not sure why. "Promise."

And then, without any further ado, Eleven leaned in and kissed Mike right on the lips.

To say Mike was surprised would be an understatement. His eyes widened and, for a moment, he almost forgot to kiss back, feeling a bit like Eleven must have felt that night he first kissed her in the middle school cafeteria almost two years ago, mere moments after he asked her to the Snow Ball. He felt every inch of skin turn red as he closed his eyes and finally returned the kiss...only for El to pull back at the last second, causing his eyes to flutter open once more.

"Wha..." Mike muttered, blinking wildly in his confusion. "Why did...?"

But Eleven simply stared at him expectantly, her face every bit as red as his. She looked impatient, as if she was waiting for him to do something or say something, and suddenly he realized what he was. He had yet to fulfill his end of the bargain.

"Again," Mike said as clearly as he could through the sizable lump in his throat and the ringing in his ears.

Eleven smiled and did as he asked, leaning in and kissing Mike on the lips. This time, he was prepared for her, and he felt his eyes slip closed as he kissed her back with all the confidence he could muster.

A moment later, they pulled apart again, their faces redder than ever. Their eyes opened, and they looked at one another, goofy smiles on their faces and their cheeks practically on fire.

"Again," Mike said once he had caught his breath.

She kissed him. He kissed back. They pulled apart.

"Again," Mike repeated, his voice both softer and more confident.

They kissed. They pulled apart.

"Again."

Another kiss. Another moment of rest.

"Again."

Another three kisses later, Mike and Eleven were practically falling over each other, laughing and giggling like the schoolchildren they were, their faces so red and so hot they felt like they were about to burst into flame. Eleven had tears in her eyes again, but these were tears of a different sort entirely, and she welcomed rather than feared them as she felt them rolling down her burning cheeks.

"Better?" Mike asked as he wiped away a tear of his own, a goofy smile still sprawled across his freckled face.

"Better," Eleven admitted, still leaning against him for both physical and emotional support. The fear and panic she had been feeling mere moments before had been replaced by a feeling of giddiness that seemed to permeate every inch of her being. She felt excited. She felt happy. She felt *loved*. "Thank you, Mike."

"Anytime," Mike said, closing his eyes and pulling her into his arms one last time. His heart was pounding in his chest and his lungs were screaming for air, but he couldn't have cared less; his El was in his arms, and that was the most important thing in the world to him.

El snuggled into Mike's (now much dryer) sweater, closing her eyes and letting herself be held. Several moments of comfortable quiet passed between them before either of them spoke, Mike being the one to finally break the silence.

"We should probably get going," he said, practically talking into Eleven's curly hair as she rested against him. "Hopper'll kill me if you get home too late."

Eleven smiled and nodded, pulling away and picking up her backpack from its position on the ground beside Mike's. They took a moment to straighten themselves out, blushing wildly all the while, before Mike finally opened the door and the two exited the AV room, hand-in-hand.

The hallways were empty, school having been dismissed for some time now, and all of the remaining students either in clubs or out on the football field. Eleven smiled as she tightened her grip on Mike's hand, the two of them strolling slowly and confidently towards the exit of the school.

"Thanks again," Eleven said quietly, her heart still pounding in her chest. "For...Pav-lov"

Mike laughed and, stopping in the middle of the hallway, finally took the initiative in leaning over and kissing El on the lips, an action that sent shivers running down both their spines. Eleven closed her eyes and hummed into the kiss, feeling complete for the first time in a long time, and never wanting the moment to end.

Alas, it did end, as all moments must, and Eleven pouted as she felt Mike pull away. Still holding her hand, he turned and went to continue on their way, only to find El refused to budge. Frowning in confusion, Mike turned back around to find El blushing madly and smiling at him with love in her eyes. She spoke only one word:

"Again."

A/N: Cute enough for you? I hope so!

(And yes, I realize Pavlov's classical conditioning is more

complicated than presented in the story, but keep in mind Mike is a fourteen-year-old boy; he's not going to go into all of the intricate little details.)

Thanks for reading, and feel free to leave some comments or kudos before you leave!